

A Tutor Half a World Away, but as Close as a Keyboard

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By **SARITHA RAI** 9/09/2005

COCHIN, India - A few minutes before 7 on a recent morning, Greeshma Salin swiveled her chair to face the computer, slipped on her headset and said in faintly accented English, "Hello, Daniela." Seconds later she heard the response, "Hello, Greeshma."

The two chatted excitedly before Ms. Salin said, "We'll work on pronouns today." Then she typed in, "Daniela thinks that Daniela should give Daniela's horse Scarlett to Daniela's sister."

"Is this an awkward sentence?" she asked. "How can you make it better?"

Nothing unusual about this exchange except that Ms. Salin, 22, was in Cochin, a city in coastal southern India, and her student, Daniela Marinaro, 13, was at her home in Malibu, Calif.

Ms. Salin is part of a new wave of outsourcing to India: the tutoring of American students. Twice a week for a month now, Ms. Salin, who grew up speaking the Indian language Malayalam at home, has been tutoring Daniela in English grammar, comprehension and writing.

Using a simulated whiteboard on their computers, connected by the Internet, and a copy of Daniela's textbook in front of her, she guides the teenager through the intricacies of nouns, adjectives and verbs.

Daniela, an eighth grader at Malibu Middle School, said, "I get C's in English and I want to score A's," and added that she had given no thought to her tutor being 20,000 miles away, other than the situation feeling "a bit strange in the beginning."

She and her sister, Serena, 10, a fourth grader at Malibu Elementary, are just 2 of the 350 Americans enrolled in Growing Stars, an online tutoring service that is based in Fremont, Calif., but whose 38 teachers are all in Cochin. They offer tutoring in mathematics and science, and recently in English, to students in grades 3 to 12.

Five days each week, at 4:30 a.m. in Cochin, the teachers log on to their computers just as students in the United States settle down to their books and homework in the early evening.

Growing Stars is one of at least a half-dozen companies across India that are helping American children complete their homework and prepare for tests.

As in other types of outsourcing, the driving factor in "homework outsourcing," as the practice is known, is the cost. Companies like Growing Stars and Career Launcher India in New Delhi

charge American students \$20 an hour for personal tutoring, compared with \$50 or more charged by their American counterparts.

Growing Stars pays its teachers a monthly salary of 10,000 rupees (\$230), twice what they would earn in entry-level jobs at local schools.

Critics have raised concern about the quality of the instruction.

"Online tutoring is not closely regulated or monitored; there are few industry standards," said Rob Weil, deputy director at the educational issues department at the American Federation of Teachers. Quality becomes a trickier issue with overseas tutoring because monitoring is harder, said Boria Sax, director of research, development and training for the online offerings of Mercy College, based in Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.

Growing Stars is rapidly expanding to accommodate students from the East Coast, Canada, Great Britain and Australia.

Its recruits, mostly with recent postgraduate and teaching degrees, already have deep subject knowledge. They must go through two weeks of technical, accent and cultural training that includes familiarization with the differences between British English, widely used in India, and American English.

"They learn to use 'eraser' instead of its Indian equivalent, 'rubber,' and understand that 'I need a pit stop' could mean 'I need to go to the loo,'" said Saji Philip, a software entrepreneur of Indian origin and the company's chairman and co-founder who works in New Jersey.

Still, the cultural divide is real. In Cochin, Leela Bai Nair, 48, a former teacher who has 23 years of experience and is an academic trainer for Growing Stars, said she was "floored at first when 10-year old American students addressed me as Leela. All my teaching life in India, my students addressed me as Ma'am," she said.

That same morning in Cochin, an English teacher, Anya Tharakan, 24, directed her student away from the subject of video games to concentrate on a passage from "Alice in Wonderland," enlivening the lessons with puzzles and picture games.

Ms. Tharakan, who tutors Serena Marinaro among others, said a bit of the cultural gulf was being bridged when students asked her "How big is your home?" or "Do you have friends at work?" or "Can you send me your photo?" For her part, Ms. Tharakan is learning about soccer and rap music from her students.

Thomas Marinaro, a chiropractor in Los Angeles and the father of Daniela and Serena, had been unhappy with the face-to-face tutoring he had previously arranged for his daughters at home. After three months with Growing Stars, however, Dr. Marinaro said the girls' math skills were already much improved. As a bonus, it cost a third of what he paid the home tutor.

Dr. Marinaro said that he had misgivings when he first considered enrolling his daughters for English tutoring. "I thought, how could somebody from India teach them English?" But after a few

weeks of monitoring, he said he relaxed. "I want my girls to develop a good vocabulary and write better, and I believe they are learning to do that."

Biju Mathew, an Indian-born software engineer, set up Growing Stars after moving to the Silicon Valley five years ago to work for a technology start-up company. In India, he had been paying \$10 a month for twice-a-week tutoring sessions for his children.

In the United States, he found, a similar service could cost \$50 or more per hour. The idea of homework outsourcing was born, and the company began offering its services in January 2004.

Growing Stars has been cautious, offering its students a choice of United States- or India-based tutors for English. It charges a \$10 premium above its normal \$20 rate for students who choose a tutor in the United States. When parents have expressed concern over a tutor's accent, the firm has offered a change of instructor.

Other online tutoring firms in the United States adopt varied approaches. Tutor.com, for instance, uses only tutors based in North America. SmarThinking of Washington, D.C., has tutors in the United States but also has instructors in South Africa, the Philippines, India and Chile. However, only those in the United States provide English lessons.

"We haven't found any cultural divide," said SmarThinking's chief executive and co-founder, Burck Smith. Eliminating factors such as skin color, appearance, gender and accent made the Internet "more egalitarian than most classrooms," he said.

The demand for online tutoring is reflected in the firm's 50 percent growth rate in the last few years. Twenty new clients - including high schools and colleges - have signed on for tutoring beginning this fall.

Firms like Growing Stars are aggressively looking to expand their online tutoring under federal programs. This summer, for instance, Growing Stars' tutors ran a successful pilot for the Upward Bound program at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, N.Y.

The program, financed by the federal Department of Education, helps children of high school age get into college. With the start of the academic year this fall, Growing Stars expects to provide online tutoring in math to 80 students from Marist's Upward Bound program.

Also, the firm has just been approved as a licensed tutoring provider in California under the federal No Child Left Behind law. Currently, Growing Stars is trying to find a way for its teachers to be fingerprinted by the Department of Justice to meet legal requirements of the program.

Mr. Philip, the chairman, said his company's work would help make Americans more competitive.

"Offshore tutoring," he said, "is a step toward ensuring that we are not always beaten in competition against Japanese carmakers, Indian software firms and Chinese manufacturers."